



Chelsea Iliff



Erik Iliff

photo courtesy Chelsea Iliff

'I love you. Goodbye.'

Part II: 'It's lonely'

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This is the second in a series of articles following two U.S. Army, Europe families through a year of deployment. Capt. Erik Iliff and Sgt. Robert Dorsey, both recently promoted, deployed in January with 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division; Chelsea Iliff and Janine Dorsey continue to go about their work and their lives in and around

Giessen, Germany. This article focuses on the women, two months into a yearlong separation from their Soldier-husbands.

Editor's note: Robert Dorsey, working at a remote location in Iraq, could not be reached for comment for this article. Erik Iliff's e-mailed response to questions appears on page 21.

Chelsea Iliff described her feelings since her husband's deployment: "I think I'm in my anger phase right now."

The day Erik left she told him goodbye, drove home, cried, showered and went to work, she said. She felt ready – but when the initial shock wore off, she said, she realized how long the next year would be.

"I think when you go through a deployment, it's like the stages when you lose somebody, when somebody actually dies. A shock, a denial, an anger phase. And right away, for me, was very much a shock. 'Fine, no problem' ... And then slowly you get into that anger phase, and you realize how long it's going to be," she said. "Actually, I think Erik and I are both sort of in there. It's like, again? Really, we're doing this again? And then you say, okay. Now why are we doing this again?"

This is the Iliffs' second deployment during their Germany tour, and Chelsea said they were both prepared for the anger and sadness that comes with separation.

"We're still very upbeat about it, still very positive, but kind of in a phase, just kind of 'grr.' We'll get past that; we'll get into an acceptance stage," she said.

Chelsea credits her work at the Giessen Education Center with keeping her motivated.

"It's almost therapeutic for me to get up and go to work every day," she said. "Because inevitably some young Soldier or spouse is waiting for me when I get to work and I need to be on my game."

Janine Dorsey said going home after her husband Robert left for Iraq "was horrible."

"There were all these people saying goodbye, and it was just hard. So we just kissed, and we left. It was maybe five minutes," she said.

Janine works at Army Community Service in Giessen, and like Chelsea said work helps her stay active, but that



Janine Dorsey



Photos displayed in Janine's work area at Giessen Army Community Service. Clockwise from left: Janine and Robert at a military ball; in a photo booth; the couple's daughter, Sophia; Sophia's artwork; Janine and Robert; Janine's son, Kekai; Sophia and Kekai.

she feels the strain sometimes – and sees it in others. Giessen is a small U.S. military community, and most of the Soldiers are deployed – which means most of the spouses are coping with drastic life changes.

“Yesterday, we had a customer at the ACS in Butzbach (a community close to Giessen), and she snapped,” Janine said. “Our copier contract ran out, and they took the copier, and we’re trying to get another one. But she was talking about her husband being deployed, and going off about the ACS. I think everybody here (at ACS), their main objective is to try to help people. And they’re going through it themselves.”

Sitting in her workspace, Janine pointed alternately in various directions, indicating the locations of other women working at Giessen ACS.

“Her husband’s shipped out; (points another way) he’s shipped out, everybody’s gone. I don’t think there’s anyone here, except for one person, who has a husband here. So we’re all in the same boat, and we’re all trying hard.”

Janine said she understands the strain many community members are going through, but that she thinks a positive approach is the best coping mechanism.

“People handle things in different ways. Sometimes I just want to say, ‘Calm down. Go to your happy place,’” she said.



When are you leaving?

Both women said while they had prepared for the deployment, stress built over the final days as weather and other factors made the departure date uncertain.

Janine said Robert left for Iraq Jan. 13, after several harried days for the family.

“He had to have everything packed, and everything done. And then everything kept changing,” she said. “One time they were supposed to leave this day, then it was the next day, and it kept getting longer. It was great to have him there, but the time kept drawing out. I didn’t want him to go, but I wanted to know when he was going. It was great to have a couple days with him, but it wasn’t relaxing or like we could take a few hours and go out to dinner ... we still hadn’t worked out our budget for the next year, so we spent hours working on that.”

Chelsea said she and Erik said goodbye more than once.

“We spent our last week, I guess, just kind of saying goodbye to each other. And then it kept getting pushed back, then I think it was snowed in ... and it gets to be frustrating. You never want to come off like, ‘boy, I’m really ready for you to go.’ Or in his case, ‘I’m really ready to go.’ But I think it was so different from our last time. Last time it was boom, go. And that was easier,” she said.

Chelsea said she talked to a neighbor whose husband had volunteered to deploy early, with the advance party.

“I thought, this lady’s crazy,” she said. “He’s going down so much earlier. But she had been through a number of deployments before, and she said she thought it was easier on her kids to do that, rather than come have him home

each time and say, ‘we’re leaving tomorrow. Oh, no, we’re leaving at three o’clock. No, wait ...’”

She said she and Erik have a traditional “Big Breakfast Day” every weekend, and they had planned Big Breakfast as his last meal at home.



“So we did Big Breakfast Day, then we did Big Breakfast Day again,” she said. “And I think once you do that, you’re like, ‘Okay, so ...’ But then when you do get the call, you really don’t believe it. You’re like okay, sure. But no, they’re really

leaving this time. I think we were both OK, though. We were sad, but we were ready to get this started. Because as soon as we start this clock ticking down, this 365 days, the sooner we can get through it. We had the energy to get going with it.”

Loneliness

Knowing Rob is spending a year in Iraq “is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, really,” Janine said. “It is. It’s just ridiculous. And you have to try – I don’t cry in front of my kids. I don’t want them to get upset, they’re already upset, and I don’t want them to think mom’s losing it. But I’m lost without him – he’s my best friend.”

Janine said some advice her father once gave her helps when she’s particularly sad.

“My dad told me, ‘It’s okay to be depressed. It’s okay to cry. Just don’t let it get to the point where you can’t get out of it. Give yourself a time limit. Say, okay, I’m going to cry for a little bit, and then it’s over with. Think of something positive: think of your children, think of all the blessings you have in your life.’ And I try,” she said.

Janine said she’s more concerned about Rob’s situation.

“I don’t really know what he’s doing, and I don’t know where he is. I just know the general area. And that kind of bothers me, because when I see something on the news, I wonder if my husband was there. It makes me very nervous. But I try not to watch the news too much,” she said. “I know we’ve had a few incidents with our guys. That kind of makes me worry. I’m very worried, actually. I’m really worried about him.”

Chelsea said she has been staying busy, and very thankful to be getting up every day and going to work.

“The weekends are harder for me than the weekdays,” she said. “I feel kind of like I was back in college. You go home after work and cook for one, sometimes I go out with my girlfriends ... it’s kind of fun sometimes. And lonely too.”

Chelsea said she thinks Erik is enjoying what he’s doing in Iraq, so much so that he sometimes almost feels guilty about it when he calls home.

“I think he’s doing good, I really do,” she said. “It’s funny. I think he really likes his job. Can you believe that? I’m thinking, he’s in Iraq. He shouldn’t be liking his job. People shouldn’t like to be deployed, right?”

She worries about him getting enough to eat, she said. Because Erik is in a location remote from the forward operating base, he gets only one hot meal a day, and some-

times that's breakfast, Chelsea said.

"This guy's been eating more Ramen Noodles. So the conditions are a concern, but I know that's a function of the facility, and of course it's safer to keep convoys off the street," she said.

For both of them, she said, the separation caused by this second deployment is harder than it was the first time.

"The first time around, you do stay a little more positive," she said. "You don't know what to expect. It's like I used to run cross-country when I was growing up, and that first time I'd go out and run each year was the easiest time, because you don't know how much it's going to hurt, how long it's going to be, or how exhausted you'll be at the end of it. But you know this time. We know how long this is."

Coping

Chelsea said because Erik's job requires him to have Internet and telephone access back to Germany, the couple has been able to stay in touch nearly every day.

"If not via e-mail, I get a phone call every couple days. Usually it's e-mail. And we have really tapped in to the AKO instant messenger thing. Don't tell my boss," she said, laughing.

She said telephone contact from Iraq in general is better and cheaper than it was on Erik's last deployment.

"It would be 'Hello' and you would get cut off," she said. "You'd call back, and get cut off again. It would become so frustrating trying to call. The communication has been so much better this time, and so much cheaper. He's got a phone plan down there where he's paying three-point-nine cents a minute to call back. The cost factor has gotten so much better since our Soldiers first went in there."

Chelsea said staying busy and staying involved in community activities is another way of coping.

"I have good friends, really good friends in the community. Other spouses whose husbands are deployed – they're in the same place, going through the same thing. There's a bond there. It's important, and I hope for other spouses that they can find those bonds, because that's really been a huge thing for me," she said.

Chelsea said she recently took Erik's frequent advice to 'take some time for yourself,' and proclaimed a "Chelsea Wellness Day."

"It was Sunday – I went to the movies, read my Bible, just did those things that I needed to catch up on for myself," she said. "Erik and I are actually doing a Bible study, reading a chapter of a book together and then discussing it, and I hadn't done that in a while."

Chelsea said she finds herself becoming more spiritual with Erik deployed.

"You pray extra, extra more and extra hard every day. That part is definitely intensified," she said.

One thing Janine has done to help her mood, she said, was make some long-planned home improvements.

"I bought a deck set, I bought carpet for the deck, I bought some plants, and I bought my son a bed, and a mattress, and two little night stands. The whole bedroom set. And I bought ..." she broke off, laughing. "This is horrible. But this is all stuff I've been wanting do but we haven't done yet."

Janine said she also bought a computer and Web camera, so she and her children, Kekai, 14, and Sophia, not yet 2, can talk to over the Internet with Rob.

"So pretty soon, I think next week, we're going to get

The view from down range

In an e-mail from Iraq, Capt. Erik Iliff wrote about the deployment, his mission and keeping in touch with his wife, Chelsea:



photo courtesy Chelsea Iliff

I was lucky to be on the last group from my battalion to deploy. Because the departure date was pushed back 3 or 4 times there was no work to do during the last week. That gave me time to take care of last-minute pay issues and more importantly to give all my time to Chelsea. Having that extra weekend together was really a blessing to us. We were able to eat at all the restaurants that I knew I would miss and mostly we were able to spend quality alone time together.

I was able to talk to Chelsea once in Kuwait, but once I arrived in Iraq I was able to have e-mail contact with her as well as phone contact within hours of arrival. There is a great e-mail and phone center on (the forward operating base) and out here at the ... JCC where I work there is a great Internet feed. I am able to e-mail her and IM (instant message) almost every day and I call her 2-3 times a week, depending on our schedules.

I am officer in charge of the ... Joint Coordination Center or JCC. My job is to coordinate between the Iraqi Police, the Iraqi Army, and the Coalition Forces. I help to train the Iraqis on deconflicting the battlespace in the city ... and help train them to react to incidents in the city. I have a job where it is my mission to literally work myself out of a job.

Anytime you are working with a language barrier it is challenging. So when an IED goes off in the city I have to work through interpreters to get the 5 W's from the Iraqi Security Forces. That may sound easy, but I have found it consistently challenging.

My take on the mission in Iraq is that ... we have a mission to accomplish, to train the ISF to secure their own country. I daily remind myself that the Iraqi Police and Iraqi Army that I work with are the key to making Iraq a safer place, and ultimately the key to Coalition Forces pulling out of Iraq.

I didn't expect to be interacting on such a personal level with the ISF. I literally live with soldiers from the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police. This makes my job fulfilling on a personal level as I see the ISF take a personal interest in making Iraq a better place.

I feel that (Chelsea and my) communication is much better from the start this deployment. I don't think you can ever be completely prepared for a deployment and a separation; however, we did what was right for us. We talked about it openly with each other and we both knew what the other's expectations were for the time we are separated.

Deployments are tough on a family. I regularly find myself thinking about Chelsea, and missing her. I hope this never changes. I want to miss her when I am away. You can learn to cope with being away, but I never want to feel comfortable with a deployment or separation.

DSL access, so hopefully we'll be able to talk to each other soon on Web cam. He's supposed to get Internet access pretty soon where's he's based," she said.

Janine said talking to Robert is her favorite mood-lifter, but she doesn't usually get the opportunity more than once every week or two.

"I talked to him last night ... we talked for like an hour. But usually it's a short conversation – about 10 minutes every two weeks. Sometimes I get lucky and I get a couple of calls a week," she said.

She has also been working out at the gym, and she and her friends usually eat together at someone's house once a week, she said.

She'd grade herself eight on a 10-point scale for her coping skills so far, and credits some of that success to her boss, Giessen ACS director Monica R. Battle, she said.

"She makes it so easy," Janine said. "When Robert calls me at work, she tells me 'take all the time you need.' She's awesome. I couldn't work in a better place, or for a better organization."

Monica said she feels it's important to take care of the people at ACS, who take care of others.

"If we don't take care of our people here, in the type of work that we do, they're not going to be able to do their jobs," she said. "If I can't keep them healthy, they're not going to be able to keep the community healthy. So I encourage my people, especially those with spouses who are down range, don't wait until you get physically sick. If you feel you need a mental health day, call in and say 'I need time out.'"

Monica said Janine's role as administrative assistant for ACS makes her central to the organization's smooth running. "She keeps me in check, she makes sure that I meet the suspenses, and she keeps me from getting my butt chewed out," she said. "She's just an exceptional employee. Even when she has a bad day, she still has a smile on her face."

Children

Janine said she's seen changes in her children, particularly Sophia, since Rob deployed.

"Sophia is really missing her dad. I didn't think she was going to be that way, because she's so young. But she has really gotten clingy ... she's been kind of having a hard time. And it took her a while to get to that point."

Sophia has seemed aware Rob was gone since he left, Janine said. "There are pictures of Rob on both cell phones. One is just for his calls, and the other one is for everybody else. But she'd pick up the phone and look at the pictures, and say 'my daddy, my daddy,' and kiss the phone."

That was the only change the almost 2-year-old showed at first, Janine said. Now, "She's funny. She used to just go to sleep when she was sleepy. Now she wants me to lay down with her, and she'll lock her arm, go like this," gesturing at her own elbow, "and hold me down. So I can't get away. If the doorbell rings she runs to the door screaming his name ... it's sad. But I'm always telling her 'Daddy's coming back.'"

Kekai, the couple's 12-year-old son, "Is a little bit older, so he kind of understands," she said. "But he worries about Rob."

"If I can't keep them (ACS employees) healthy, they're not going to be able to keep the community healthy."

— Monica R. Battle, Giessen ACS director



Her son has been good company for her since the deployment began, Janine said, and she enjoys planning activities with him and Sophia.

"This past weekend I took the kids to the fair in Butzbach. They had a great time – then we all went out to eat, at our favorite little Italian restaurant," she said.

"Kekai's been gone to sleep-overs at a friend's house the last three weekends, and it's funny because it's so quiet when he's gone," Janine said. "I have friends who don't have kids, and I can only imagine how lonely that is. It's lonely with my kids, but without them? I would really just kind of be depressed."

Community

Janine said working for ACS makes her realize how much the community has to offer for spouses of deployed Soldiers. "People need to come out to the ACS. We have classes on all kinds of things. It's great. It's not just financial classes and the Yellow Ribbon Room and how to cope, we have cooking classes and scrap-booking classes." (For more on ACS, see page 28.)

Chelsea said she relies on Family Readiness Group meetings to help keep her in touch and informed during the deployment.

"I do my best to hit all meetings that might be important," she said. "Although I'm always pleased to see people at the meetings, I see the same people at each meeting and rarely does someone new join the group ... I want to see some new faces!"

She said the meetings offer an opportunity to learn new information and talk with other spouses, and also a chance to help the community.

"Our FRG has a group of ladies who help new moms cope with having a new baby," Chelsea said. "We have a group of ladies who bake cookies each month and mail them down range so each Soldier in the battery receives a few cookies from home. We have an 'Adopt a Single Soldier' program where we mail care packages periodically to those single guys."

"An FRG is not intended to be a be-all, end-all when your husband deploys. It is not a function that will replace your husband. An FRG is intended to empower spouses ... empower them with knowledge and opportunities. It gives them the information they need to know and the opportunities to better themselves and their families," she said.

Monica said the residents of Giessen rely on each other to keep going until the brigade comes home, bringing their loved ones back to them.

"It's important that we take care of each other," she said. "When somebody's having a bad day, we try to pick them up."